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The Looming Constitutional Crisis

WASHINGTON, (CDN) — A "time bomb" is ticking on Capitol Hill.

If and when it goes off, it could cause a paralyzing crisis in government and the first national constitutional convention since 1787.

Members of Congress are genuinely worried by what one Senator has called "a massive assault on the Constitution of the U. S.."

Such a possibility, together with the specter of an uncertain Presidential election and another violent summer, has raised doubts about the American political process among the most optimistic men in Congress.

"We all worry about the obvious problems — Vietnam, poverty, inflation," said a midwestern Senator. "But few people are paying attention to the possibility that we may be facing more seriou crisis within our government."

The most imminent crisis arises from Article V of the Constitution, which says that "Congress . . . on the application of the several legislatures of two-thirds of the several states, shall call a convention for proposing amendments . . ."

For nearly 10 years right-wing groups such as the Liberty Lobby and the John Birch Society have been seeking certain "liberty amendments" to the Constitution, which would set a limit in income taxes and curtail the power of the Supreme Court.

These campaigns got nowhere until 1964, when the Supreme Court ordered state legislatures reapportioned on a "one-man, one-vote" basis. In Congress, a group of lawmakers, headed by Senate Republican Leader Dirksen (Ill.), sought by legislation or amendment to water down, or set aside, the court's ruling. All these attempts have failed.

Spurned by Dirksen

Hence, in an attempt to circumvent Congress, Dirksen has inspired a campaign to get state legislatures to take advantage of Article V.

During the last three years the legislatures of 32 states, acting with little deliberation and publicity, have passed resolutions calling on Congress for a constitutional convention. Only two more are needed to reach the necessary two-thirds, and there is a good chance at least two of the legislatures now in session will pass resolutions.

"The odds are pretty good it will happen," said an aide to Sen. Tydings (D-MD.), who has led the opposition to Dirksen. "That's why we're sitting on a powder keg."